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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women: Implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern

Statement submitted by the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 30 and 31 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31 of 26 July 1996.

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The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts (WAGGGS) emphasizes the importance of promoting good health practices for adolescents. Education on adolescent health should be made available for adolescents, parents, teachers, communities and leaders.

Adolescents have unique requirements in terms of health. Yet their requirements often fall between those of children and of adults, which are usually well catered to. Health issues specific to adolescents are often ignored.

Adolescents are, on the whole, healthy, but they are at an age when they develop habits that may affect their long-term health.

Whether we like it or not, adolescents are affected by many adult health problems, and yet they are often not educated sufficiently in health issues. Adolescents themselves begin to make decisions about how they are going to live their lives: eating habits, sexual relations, and smoking and drinking habits often begin in adolescence.

It makes economic sense to prevent potential health problems caused by teenage pregnancy, smoking, unsafe sex and poor nutrition when it isn't too late, rather than cure the problems at great expense later on.

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Adolescence is the period of life when nutritional advice can be very effective. The importance of clean water, healthy diets and sanitation should be taught to adolescents who are thinking about moving away from home.

If adolescents are taught about the dangers of smoking before they start, they will be less likely to take up smoking.

In early adolescence, most young people are not yet sexually active. This is the ideal time to teach them about safe sex. UNAIDS statistics show that the message that condom use means safer sex is getting through to more young people than older groups. Health education, if made appropriate and relevant and given at the right age, does have a long-lasting effect.

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts is unique in the type of education that it offers. Many adolescents who do not go to school can still learn about health issues through non-formal educational programmes adopted by voluntary organizations such as WAGGGS. Good practice developed in adolescence will have long-lasting effects during adulthood. The WAGGGS method of educating adolescents can be used as an example that works.

Non-formal education is organized educational activity outside the established formal system and is intended to serve an identifiable learning clientele with identifiable learning objectives. The acquisition of life skills and the development of attitudes based on an integrated value system is made possible through non-formal education. Non-formal education organizations like WAGGGS have a number of characteristics that give them a unique ability to make a contribution to the lifelong educational process of an individual. Characteristics of non-formal education lend themselves to adolescent health education. Learning comes as a result of the practical experience of the individual and not only from a theoretical explanation. Non-formal education lends itself to engaging girls and young women in learning about health issues in an active and participatory way. Non-formal education allows for experiential learning, and not just "text book" learning.

Non-formal education organizations also harness the desire of young people for group involvement. Peers can symbiotically learn through dialogue and mutual experiences. Peer group education is particularly important in teaching adolescents about health issues, because adolescents sometimes feel that they are misunderstood or misrepresented by older people.

The World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts is the largest voluntary organization for girls and young women in the world, reaching nearly 10 million members in 136 countries. It provides a dynamic, flexible, values-based non-formal educational programme that is relevant to the needs of girls and young women.